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## Anonymity and Spectral Existence in Urban Space

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**Abstract:** The closeness of the other implies a certain distance in urban space. We can ask with Georg Simmel: to what degree is that which is close actually remote? If Marc Guillaume is right, and we open ourselves more quickly towards strangers than towards our acquaintances, a paradoxical situation arises: that which is close is actually the most remote, implying the spectrality of the Other in urban space. In this paper, I try to examine the identity of the Ego within its everyday averageness, with special emphasis on the relationship between spectrality and the posthuman condition.

**Keywords:** Anonymity; Spectral Existence; Urban Space; Self; Other.

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It is the ontological structure of everydayness that is responsible for the authenticity of our identity and for the quality of our encounter with the Other. Since the Lévinasian concept of otherness unfolds rather within the sphere of the “should” than in the ontologically relevant medium of the “is,” we will have to turn our attention to the actual social projections of alterity.

The *closeness* of the other involves a certain *distance*. Following Simmel, we can even meditate upon how far that which is close is. If by strangeness we do not mean the complete unknown, but the complete indifference towards our situation, then do we not feel a certain temptation to open ourselves up to the strangeness that manifests itself thus? Perhaps we could even state with Guillaume that we open ourselves more confidently to the stranger than to our most intimate acquaintances. Hence the paradoxical situation that the closest nearness is farthest from us. This paper is an attempt to reconsider the identity of the *Ego* as constituted within the mediocrity of everydayness and the reality of proximity that distances itself.

In our society plagued by massification, the direct experience of the Other is victimized by the otherness expressed in



the anonymous and artificial strangeness. The everyday experience of strangeness does not necessarily favor the comprehension of alterity. We could even say that we are witnessing the artificial production of strangeness. On the one hand, we have people of different nationalities, ethnicities and religions, who constantly remind us of otherness, and on the other hand, corresponding symbolical expressions. Guillaume has defined the metamorphoses of our current identity as *spectral existence*. This is, in fact, the mode of existence and *transformation* of the postmodern individual.<sup>1</sup> What kind of possibility for self-realization do modern humans have under the mask of uncontrollable changes? Can we even still speak about authentic self-identity in this world of simulated attitudes and chaotic alterity?

In Guillaume's reasoning, the transfigurations of alterity manifest themselves within our many-faceted world, and the potentially concrete manifestations of the Other take on the form of *spectral existence*, i.e. the openness of our *ipseity* towards otherness and the possibility to assume new avatars. The spectrality of our urbanized existence can be apprehended as potential existence and openness towards new possibilities. It is potential, since it always already includes the possibilities to become something else as its very own "not yet," crossing nevertheless over from the potential to the dimension of actual existence in our attitude towards the other.

One can treat Guillaume's and Baudrillard's concept of spectral existence as the social-ontological correspondent of Heidegger's category of potential existence. The Heideggerian *Dasein* is always ahead of its future, and its actual identity is

the not yet realized, as it draws its identity from the future effects of his present decisions. Spectral existence, however, reflects the personhood of the individual living in the eternal present, as it is constituted in his attitude towards others. The existential roots of the *Dasein's* potential existence and those of my selfhood's spectrality are closely related. Just as the *Dasein* cannot help but relate to itself or exist in any other way than within this mode of existence, I am also unable to avoid the Other amidst the contingencies of my everydayness. This existential coercion could even be termed as the givenness of our attitude towards potentiality and otherness.

The medium of my attitude towards the other can rarely unfold itself within the context of familiarity, awareness, and safety. In our pluralistic world, we most often relate ourselves to an impenetrable and uncontrollable Other. Just as we are unable to foresee our future that is constituted through our decisions, we are also helpless witnesses of our identity as it is formed in the domain of strangeness. Today, spectrality unfolds amidst the open potential existence. As a consequence, my present self is, in principle, always exposed to the influences of uncontrollable otherness. Since alterity is originally strangeness and separation, we will now have to ask the question regarding the phenomenological constitution of this strangeness.

Spectrality that appears under the guise of strangeness assumes the form of anonymity. In our society that is wallowing in simulacra, transforming the natural beyond recognition and practicing the terror of immoderate consumption, identity most often manifests itself in the simulated



form. However, a simulated identity can hardly be integrated into an exponentially developing social process. The generalization of disguised manifestations favors the massification of the metropolises and the enthronement of the anonymous Other. Our inhuman cities and lonely masses are the consequences of the individual will's dissolution within the finality-lacking potentialities of otherness. As soon as the *Ego* is dissolved in the anonymous *the They* (*das Man*), there is nothing left but to subject our selfhood to the terror of massification. In its literal Heideggerian reflection, *the They* become the anonymous carrier for identities that always remain alien to each other, but nevertheless unproblematically dissolve within their momentary act of communication. Under the dominance of *the They's* degraded existentials, we can hardly speak about authentic communication and community. Aristotelian friendship, based on likeness and virtue, is substituted by the slogans of massification, the indifference of "not knowing you" and the egoism of "everything is due to me."

People whose selfhood unfolds within the play area of the society of anonymity are unable to think in terms of the values categories expounded by Lévinas. Spectrality as a contingent self-determining quality lies far away from the personal character of the Gaze that exposes the intimacy of my selfhood and functions within the distance between Me and You. A randomly constituted selfhood is unable to assume the personal character of the Gaze, in which the Other manifests itself its autonomous and original existence that is separate from me, creating the space and the occasion for the wonder of Aristotelian friendship. When Cicero and Aristotle stated that a

true friend is another self, they hinted at the message of selfhood that can be read in the language of the Gaze and to the fulfillment of our Ego within social coexistence.<sup>2</sup>

The spectrality that is exposed to contingency and lack of control is also inserted within the relationships of mass consumption. As an unprincipled consumer, I am unable to select; and as soon as I consume for the pure sake of consumption or in order to quench kind of some social or psychological desire with me, the differentiating effect of selection ceases, and I myself am degraded into an anonymous factor within the sphere of the simulacra, a mere sign for others to behold within a world of signs.

In our world that constantly changes its aspect, everything is exposed a mere sign. The disappearing Gaze exposes he world in the hypostasis of the directly given sign that is in no need of any interpretation. At this point, the Other loses its self-identity, and becomes a victim of the depersonalization into an anonymous unit. These losses of self-identity hide world political and social phenomena worthy to be reckoned with. The world of anonymous alterity is no longer a personal world, but the empire of mixing, polysemic signs and of simulacra that coincide in their self-identity. This world manifests itself not as the ordered structure of things, but as the random and illogical combination of elements.<sup>3</sup>

In the world of anonymous alterity, the Other is generally alien to me and impossible to be addressed, manifesting itself as an indifferent being. It unexpectedly appears and then disappears again from my field of awareness, since it has lost its identity, thus remaining a mere likeness, homogenous with any other and



exchangeable by any Gaze. The Gaze is individual and differentiated, while the likeness reminds me of the homogeneity of impersonal strangeness. The strangeness of the Gaze is well apprehended by literary thought, which is especially sensitive to the problem of simulated identity. Kafka's texts, and particularly *The Metamorphosis*, paradigmatically emphasize the uncertainty and discontinuity of individual identity, as well as the ontological unpredictability of existential situations. Of course, one can see the actual reflections of the discontinuity of identity within the civilized world.

Today we are very much used to the discontinuity stemming from the incoherence of postmodernity and based on the contradictory character of signs. This existential experience is confirmed by the illusion of the Other's availability. Telegraphic forms of communication, telephony, and other means of real-time communication increasingly strengthen the illusion of the Other's presence. However, telecommunication lacks precisely the alterity that carries the Gaze.

Similarly to the structure of the metropolis, the means of telecommunication nourish the potential and the illusion of the Other's availability. In the context of mediatized communication, the communicating partners can to a large extent omit the controlling strategies that are of such importance for personal connections. A telephone conversation will never have the directness of personally speaking to someone, or offer the experience of the Other's presence. Instead, the transmitting party related to a depersonalized being, whose identity escapes the possibilities and requirements of identification by name. During technological contact, the

identity of the Other eludes the alternatives of identification contained within traditional forms of communication, which do not present the Other as a person among many, but as an individual subject. Hiding behind technological communication, the faded identity falling into anonymity especially favors the unfolding of spectral identity. The individual at the other end of the line is not a specific subject but an individual inclined to and capable of assuming the most diverse identities.<sup>4</sup> Telecommunication, the metropolitan masses, and the stereotypical attitude of mass-media envelops the individual in the mist of anonymity.

The public sphere also unfolds under the sign of anonymity in our society. However, the manifestation of otherness in the form of anonymity is by no means an exclusively postmodern phenomenon. According to Guillaume, anonymity is already a characteristic of Gutenberg's age, since the spread of printing techniques creates the possibility for the Gaze of the Other to hide behind the written text. It is not my aim here to enter into the hermeneutical analysis of the written text's personal character, but, when discussing the problem of Otherness in our current age, I can hardly omit the fact of the Other's representation that is constituted through us, or within the social sphere.

The written text can also be conceived of as a cultural reality that hides the Gaze of the Other and the existential character of its individuality and originality formed on the spur of the moment. While the Socratic dialogues always associated otherness with the specific person and the physical presence of the party involved in the discussion, written texts have integrated a one-sided anonymity



into the communication process, insofar as the reader is entrusted to his/her own thoughts, imagination, and interpretive skills, hiding the concrete individuality of the author. It is also not my aim to discuss here whether anonymity is more evident in the case of the author or the reader, but I can venture to the conclusion that recorded culture generally favored the effacement of vivid and lifelike alterity. More exactly, the personal existence and individuality of the Other has become the victim of cultural events that can freely be interpreted. Communication through electronic means has further widened the gap between the Self and the Other.

We could even say, with some exaggeration, that the Other as an identity that carries significance has completely disappeared from audiovisual communication processes. The face of the TV announcer does not convey a Gaze that would specifically address the viewers, and the text read by him or her is not a message that would concern me personally. As an employee, the TV announcer ceases to exist as an individual, and is degraded into a face and a voice, which can transform the person into a model in the context of a more fortunate social perception. Nevertheless, existence as a model is as far away from the apprehension of the Other's essence as a self as the unceasing and monotonous voice of the unknown radio announcer. That which counts today as a model is nothing else than an enframable manifestation of strangeness, solidified into a stereotype and uncritically idolized by the masses, being thus quite removed from the Other's essence.

As soon as all our social experiences expose us to otherness that is sinking into

anonymity, we can legitimately ask whether we can find the Other's essence at all, insofar as we are speaking to the anonymous "the They" in almost every case. Paradoxically, the answer is to be found within the essence of anonymity.

Anonymity has an alienating effect, as it distances us from the original openness of our selfhood towards otherness. "This anonymity bridges the gap that somehow separates the subject not only from itself, but also from its social context and even reality as a whole".<sup>5</sup> As we can see, there is a certain level at which anonymity itself becomes productive, providing the framework of normality for the individual. In the world of simulacra, anyone can easily become the victim of the flickering images, the models and stereotypes that appear, and at the fragile threshold between reality and its copy, one can become inclined to substitute the real world with the imaginary one. Thus, we can expect from anonymity the distancing from the imaginary and the possibility of a healthful distancing from ourselves as well. As such, anonymity has a double role: on the one hand, it depersonalizes the Other, and forces the social actor into the world of the They, while, on the other hand, it acts as a social operator that helps to ground our selfhood.

At the same time, we can also view anonymity as the guaranteeing factor of a healthful indifference. It is not accidental, and neither just a psychologically motivated fact that most people open up more easily to strangers and are more inclined to invest an emotional or commercial basis into those who are farther removed from them, than into people to whom they are tied by friendship and/or kinship. At the same time, we are also more inclined to



more easily and objectively evaluate the errors of strangers than the failures of those in whose Gaze we can almost see ourselves. I would like to call this peculiarity the *load capacity by otherness* of the human psyche. Each person is capable to understand otherness of a certain quality and quantity, according to his or her previous experiences, inborn openness, and ethically grounded patience. Beyond this level, one can become withdrawn, aggressive, or even escape into the world of phantasy. As soon as one feels oneself unable to assume otherness, social relationships are urbanized, i.e. openness is replaced with suspicion, and the Gaze is substituted with the schizophrenic monologue.<sup>6</sup>

Amidst the changing challenges facing us, most people establish a pendulum-like relationship with the vast and anonymous society. Most of us are terrified of the exclusion from public consciousness, and thus seek the publicity of anonymity, but we also feel overloaded by the peeping Other, and seek to avoid its alienating effect. Thus, the world of anonymity makes it possible for the individual to separate the familiar and the alien worlds, to distinguish at their discretion between the private and the public sector, or even to substitute the burdening alterity with the imaginary reality.

In some cases, the self-organizing mechanism of the communities and the toolkit of renewable identity can be attributed to anonymity, which becomes thus a generating factor for new trends or even a social operator that modifies the social trend according to a foreseeable logic. This is possible since anonymity contains the open possibilities of the manifestations of undefined otherness. In an undefined

society that shrouds itself in the indifference of anonymity, theoretically anyone can step onto the stage and thus break out of anonymity. The sudden and often unforeseeable events of achievement are naturally followed by the similarly unexpected turn of falling back into anonymity. In the world of collective anonymity, otherness unfolds within the medium of open possibilities. Here we do not have to deal with a specific otherness whose identity could be grasped, but with the emergence of the “counterfeit identities” that are similar to the simulacra.

The anonymous other within the public field of action directly affects our selfhood. Its effect is rarely clear and predictable. Living among the strangers, we cannot be sure to what extent the stranger who unexpectedly comes our way or deeply reaches inside our apperception (Simmel) controls us amidst the everyday representations of otherness. In other words, the question is: what kind of potential identity formations does the otherness that can be essentially differentiated from our own nature, the stranger addressing us carry? And while projecting them onto us, to what extent does it determine our identity? Was Sartre right when he identified other people with hell, thus anathemizing the identity-changing function of otherness? Last but not least, how does alterity relate to us within the world of spectral existence and thought?

Spectral existence refers to those multifaceted individuals who barely present one or the other of their many faces within communicative existential relationships, and even then mostly inadvertently, under the influence of arbitrary circumstances. The spectrality of our social situation represents a consequence of the disagreeable



dichotomy between the subject and the world, a repeating process in which we can witness the sequential formation of identities. It is also true that the problem of identity cannot even really be raised in such a context. The entities that spontaneously and uncritically adapt themselves to the possible aspects of alterity are floating within the constant metamorphosis of subjectivity and are thus unable to process their situation.

According to these ideas, otherness can have a depersonalizing function as well. As long as I do not relate alterity to understanding my psychophysical limits, but lose myself in the metamorphoses of the anonymous other, I am also risking anonymity, identification with alien symbols, and degradation into a mere sign within the world of signs. We do not come to know ourselves in such a context, since we become unable of authentic knowledge. "The more you delimit yourself from the physical body, identity, and name, the more you enter into the scope of a deterrent coding and meta-coding process..."<sup>7</sup> At this point, we are not talking about social existence, but *sociality*.<sup>8</sup> The individual who identifies with the anonymity of alterity's metamorphoses ceases to practice an attitude characteristic for a specifically named subject at the level of *sociality*, because, as a result of my uncritical identification with otherness, I cease to practice an attitude characteristic for a person who can be named, and I begin to communicate as a code; and there is no place for the Other within the world of codes.

One can even draw conclusions about the postmodern endangerment of the Other's autonomy from the abovementioned ideas. In order to eliminate any trite

execution of this statement, I will quote some relevant ideas of the philosophers mentioned above.

Beyond the possibility of borrowing undefined identities, the spectral existence characteristic for postmodernity has also led to the crisis of alterity. According to Baudrillard,<sup>9</sup> the degradation of otherness into a mere sign is (also) a consequence of the exaggerated extension of individual freedom. In a world in which everything can be ordered and adapted to the customers' individual taste, we can discover the agony of the Other. As a result of depersonalization, the Other as a sign can be formed and transformed according to anyone's likeness.<sup>10</sup> Although the decline of modernity has increased focus on the problem of otherness, it also relegated to the background its concrete perception.

Our modern technological possibilities signaled the advent of an era in which the Other can be almost limitlessly produced. The ethical attitude was substituted with simple production. The Other has lost its status as an autonomous person, and amidst the illusion of freedom, gives the impression of the potential to be modelled almost as an object.

As soon as we lose our capacity to view the Gaze and subordinate the Other to our subjective whim, we deprive it from its original and unrepeatable fatefulness, and furthermore, we lose the perceptibility of our own destiny within the mirror of the Other's fate.

In the current world of genetic engineering, plastic surgery, and autistic cultures, our selfhood is being deprived of its alterity. Amidst our increasing isolation, the deprivation of otherness goes hand in hand with the artificial production of



alterity in the absence of the Other. The lacunae within our attitude towards the Other are replaced by the endless anesthetization of our autistically formed self-image and the adaptation of the Other to our own imaginary ideals. Thus, the modeling of universalized corporeality can be viewed as the symptom of a much deeper intervention: the remodeling of otherness and even of *destiny* itself.

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## NOTES

1. Spectral existence is excellently characterized by the products of our heterogeneous culture, from graffiti to masquerades and from libertine manifestation to anonymous protests.
2. Not accidentally, hardly paying attention to the Gaze, our disintegrating world often evokes the Platonic cosmological motif of Love – although not so much in a philosophical, but in a rather commercial, propagandistic or self-reassuring context. In today's society, that has lost its faith in friendship based on virtue, the nostalgia for mythical beginnings is increasingly strong, and in direct proportion to the progressively widespread experience of isolation, there is a growing demand for the new, androgynous human, who is practically devoid of any identity. The holistic anthropological vision of the New Age and the millennial new religious movements are also the consequences of the distrust towards the Other and our losing sight of the Gaze. While classical anthropologies have treated selfhood individually and monolithically, the many-facetedness of postmodernity exposes the Self to the play of external circumstances, suspending the ontological borders responsible for the place of the individual.
3. Cf. the idea of the "world as a great collage" in Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume, *Figuri ale alterității*, Pitești, Paralela 45, 2002, p. 17.
4. This idea could easily be contradicted by the personal character of the communication with the Other who is known to us. Communication based on a personal relationship calls into question the identity-obscuring effects of telecommunication.
5. Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume, *Figuri ale alterității*, p. 21.





6. No wonder that the social sphere of unassumable alterity has finally lead to a schizophrenic culture. In parallel to the increase in distrust and incomprehension towards the other, we can witness schizophrenic interior conflicts, self-alienation and estrangement.

7. Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume, *Figuri ale alterității*, p. 29.

8. *Sociality* as the degenerate form of social existence is the correspondent of the ontological “*objectity*”, replacing the consciously assumed conditions of socialization with the contingent factors of irresponsible adaptation.

9. Jean Baudrillard, Marc Guillaume, *Figuri ale alterității*, p. 99, 129ff.

10. These ideas (characteristic for the philosophy of their birth decade, the 80s) can be excellently applied to the effects of the subsequently developed digital photographic technology, as computerized processing adapts the likeness of the model to the imagination and the expectations of the manufacturer, tailoring it to his subjective requirements and thus robbing it from its radical otherness.